

Troping the Asylum

Miss Minn was admitted on December 24, 1910. Her "Schedule No. 2" form states that she was an 18 year old Presbyterian "domestic" who had been insane for some 3 years; her insanity manifested itself in a "disposition to wander away from home." She suffered from "immoral delusions" and was considered "dangerous to herself." She had committed theft, and had herself been "committed to Industrial School." Her conduct had been good, but had gradually changed for the worse. She was considered "mentally defective" (although her letters suggest otherwise), a "moral imbecile."

Miss Minn seems to have been observant and sociable with other patients. Yet the examiner considered her somewhat withdrawn or devious (ie, "she would not give me the details of her life freely"), even though she was candid enough indicate to him that she intended to clope as soon as she could. The Clinical Record reveals the tendency of the authorities to retain certain value judgements even in the face of contrary or conflicting information. What she was diagnosed with was slightly paradoxical by nature – it could be applied to someone quite the opposite of "imbecile," but who persisted in "immoral" behavior and beliefs. The record also reveals how selective the authorities could be, emphasizing Miss Minn's pursuit of pleasure ("she takes a great deal of pride in discussing the fact that she is having a good time and that she is going to continue to have a good time no interest in anything except as shown by her life in the last few months") but making nothing of her intense desire to "get out of here" before her father could come for her, and to be "entirely free from him." Miss Minn ran away from home as soon as there was anywhere to run to, so presumably there was a reason. Nothing is done about this.

Like many patients and patients-to-be, Miss Minn appreciated that the examination could "create" as well as expose the symptoms of "madness." She had been reluctant to talk, because "she thought that talking too much was the cause of getting her into trouble before." Her language was selectively quoted against her, as if her moral depravity was best conveyed in the argot of a subclass: "'You bet your life I'm not quiet.'" Talking really did get her in trouble!

"H.C." [Dr. Harvey Clare] noted on January 3, 1911 that "she seems to be a bad tempered girl" on the basis of her occasionally getting cross and scolding other patients. At the same time he attributed to her considerable vivacity, the capacity to laugh at a word. He did not attempt to connect one attribute to